

Pensacola News Journal  
for: Sunday, July 16, 2000  
by: Daniel E. Mullins  
Extension Horticultural Agent  
Santa Rosa County

## **Zinnias, a Sure Bet for Summer Color**

Zinnias have been described as the happy flowers because they merrily go about their business of flowering all during the summer. The brighter and hotter the weather, the better they bloom.

Anyone who needs a splash of color in the landscape at this time of year should consider establishing a bed of zinnias. Plant breeders have provided many choices of flower forms, colors and plant heights.

There are three basic flower forms: dahlia flowered, cactus flowered and daisy flowered. Colors range from white to scarlet, with all shades in between. Some varieties are specifically bred for cut flowers, with 2 foot stems, and there are dwarf forms for bedding. There are even low spreading ground cover types such as the *Zinnia angustifolia* varieties.

State Fair and Ruffles are two outstanding varieties for the cut garden. Another new cut variety is Big Red. This one has performed well in trials in Santa Rosa and Suwannee County.

Establishing a bed of Zinnias is easy and fun. Following are some suggestions:

- ✍ Zinnias are high light requiring plants so choose a site that receives full sunlight.
- ✍ Amend the bed by applying generous amounts of compost, peat or manure and till to thoroughly incorporate with existing soil to a depth of 6 to 8 inches.
- ✍ Lime is sometimes needed to raise the pH of our locally acid soils. The ideal pH range for Zinnias is between 6.3 and 6.8. Use lime only when the need is determined by a soil test. If required, it can be added and incorporated while amending the bed.
- ✍ Plant seeds about one-fourth of an inch deep. Germination is rapid at temperatures above 80 degrees F., requiring only 3 to 5 days. Thin plants to a spacing of 9 to 12 inches between plants.

✂ Mulch the bed once plants are about 6 inches high. Apply a coarse material such as pine needles, leaves or bark on the soil surface at depth of 2 to 3 inches.

✂ Fertilize lightly once a month, or often enough to keep plants growing vigorously, but don't overdo it. The application of excessive amounts of nitrogen fertilizer can have negative effects.

✂ The only major pests in our area are a couple of different fungal leaf spots. These diseases can be controlled to acceptable levels by mulching, watering only during the early morning hours and the application of an approved fungicide, when necessary.

✂ Cut and enjoy flowers anytime. This will encourage regrowth and more flowering.

✂ Pinch or clip off old, faded flowers before they have a chance to go to seed. This practice will keep Zinnias and other annuals in a flowering mode.

**Question of the Week:** My tomato plants produced well until recently. They now look terrible, having stopped bearing. Most of the leaves are dead too. Is there any hope for more tomatoes this year?

**Answer:** Tomatoes stop setting fruit when night temperatures climb into the low 70s. They would resume setting fruit in September or early October if the plants were healthy. However, based upon your description, I suspect that leaf blights have severely weakened your plants.

Fall tomatoes are a possibility, but you would need to remove the old diseased plants and start in a different spot with healthy young transplants. If you can find any plants, establish them in the garden during late July. Regular fungicide applications are usually necessary in order to protect against blights during our muggy summers.

The trick is to have vigorous tomato plants that are blooming when the night temperature falls to between 65 and 70 degrees. Fall tomatoes are a real possibility!